

The Manpower Structure of the Marine Corps Casualty Branch

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Scenario

It is 0800 on a typical Sunday morning. A family is sitting down to breakfast. Then, they hear what seems to be a car door slamming in their driveway. An eerie feeling unsettles a mother and father who have patiently awaited the safe return of their son, a Marine, who has been deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom for the past five months. The mother peeks through the blinds and, to her dismay; an unmarked sedan is parked in the driveway with two gentlemen dressed in military garb -- one in the Marine Corps' green Service "A" uniform, the other, in the Navy Dress Blue. The mother and father are filled with dread as they realize the probable news that comes with such a visit. They have heard the stories, seen the news and the movies. They know that they have lost their son. He has become one of many service members who gave the ultimate sacrifice in the name of freedom and democracy. The men approach, the father slowly opens the door. After verification of the family's identification, the Marine begins the process with the phrase, "We regret to inform you that your son, ... has been killed in the line of duty" or words to that effect. The family goes through the full range of emotions -- sorrow, anger, denial, acceptance -- in an attempt to grasp and give meaning to their loved one's sacrifice. After a day or two of mourning,

the grief momentarily dissipates, yet the family still wonders,
"Who is going to assist us with our son's affairs."

As of October 2005, over 2200 U. S. military service members, 750 of were Marines, have given their lives in support of Operations Enduring¹ and Iraqi Freedom.² Over 4800 other Marines have received injuries of varying degrees of seriousness.³ Currently, 220 Marines are missing in action from the Vietnam Era, 660 unaccounted for from the Korean Conflict, 1 from the Cold War, and 4700 from World War II.⁴ To put these numbers in perspective, over 11,000 Marine families have required casualty assistance in some form or another, and the number steadily climbs. The Marine Corps Casualty Branch, composed of less than 20 Marines and civilians, handles everything from death and injury entitlements, funeral honors, and prisoner of war/missing in action recovery. The Marine Corps prides itself on providing the minimum required human resources, but the Corps is doing so at the risk of not properly sourcing the manpower it requires through inefficient means. Restructuring the Marine Corps Casualty Section's table of organization in order to provide service members and their families with the attention they deserve is necessary.

The Current Manpower Structure

The Casualty Branch's manpower structure does not support what is required nor does it reflect, on paper, what it looks like in reality. The table of organization, or T/O, reflects a manpower structure of 12 individuals of varying military and

civilian pay grades -- one Captain, one Lieutenant, one Gunnery Sergeant, two Staff Sergeants, one Cpl one nonrated Marine clerk, one GS13 as the branch head, two GS12's, and two GS09's civil service employees.⁵ In reality, the branch is composed of 5 civilians and 10 Marines: A captain, a first lieutenant, two gunnery sergeants, two staff sergeants, two sergeants, one corporal, and two lance corporals.⁶ The T/O also only reflects three sections - an Operations Section, an Administration Section, and a Repatriation Section. When in reality the Casualty Branch is composed of four sections, each with distinct missions: The administration section handles basic correspondence for the branch, such as condolence letters and temporary additional duty orders; the operations section, the heartbeat of the branch, handles casualty reporting, coordination and assignment of the casualty assistance calls, claims and benefits; the funeral honors section coordinates funerals of veterans and retirees; and the repatriation section makes liaison with Marine families who have loved ones captured or missing. Three of the Marines within the Casualty Branch are mobilized reservists who were assigned to active duty as augmentees. These reservists are only allowed on active duty for 179 days at a time. This means that they have to submit requests every six months to remain on active duty in support of the branch. Currently, approval for such requests is not an

issue due to the global war on terrorism. Moreover, the Marines within the Casualty Branch are from varying military occupational specialties. With exception of the operations officer, the bulk of the branch's T/O require administrative skills; however, only four Marines possess these skills. The remainder of the section reflects a variety of other skill designations from infantry to armory. However, this can prove to be detrimental when an individual does not possess the clerical or communication skills necessary to organize case files, speak to families, and assist in the completion.

The advantage of the current structure is the continuity that the civil service employees bring without concern of tour and service limits and permanent changes of station; however, this stability is not without sacrifice. The civilian employees cannot normally be forced to work past a 40-hour workweek whereas the work schedule of the Marines of the branch can be tailored to the mission with little relief. During periods of major conflict, the casualty branch can be required to work countless hours to facilitate the level of care expected.

One intangible lacking from the current structure is senior leadership. Although there is a GS13 at the helm of the branch, and can no doubt provide a certain level of expertise, civilian leadership is no substitute military leadership. There is,

however, a company grade Marine officer within the branch that can provide a certain level of leadership as the operations officer but even he/she could benefit from the administrative acumen and mentoring that a seasoned field grade adjutant can provide; After all, it is adjutants in the subordinate organizations that facilitate the Corps' casualty assistance program and who better to provide direction then someone who has experience as a customer of the branch.

The existence of the funeral honors section not being reflected on the T/O presents its own unique set of problems. Military members that comprise the funeral honors section are mobilized reservists. Because the section is not reflected on the T/O, the enlisted assignment monitors are not obligated to backfill the positions should they become vacant.

Lastly, the Casualty Branch and Hospital Liaison relationship is not being optimized. Currently the Hospital liaison teams provide CACO-type services to Marines and families who are either in an inpatient or outpatient status at various military medical treatment facilities (MTFs). The Marine Corps Casualty Branch keeps case files on all deceased, seriously ill/injured (SI) or very serious ill-injured who are being treated in these MTFs as are the liaisons. This seems to be unnecessary duplication of efforts with one caveat. The liaisons report to the commanders of the MTFs whereas the

Casualty Branch reports to the Commandant the Marine Corps, who is ultimately responsible for the status and care of Marines. Like combat cargo officers aboard ship, the liaisons have no loyalty to Marine Corps with exception to their inherent duties. The advantage to the current structure is the Marine Corps is not responsible for the infrastructure that the liaisons are housed or the funding; however, there is the potential for a rift whereas the liaison is under no obligation, with exception to courtesy, to provide shared situational awareness of the status of patients to the casualty branch.

Proposed Structure

Criticism of the current structure should not come without a viable proposal on how to correct it. First, The T/O must be remodeled to reflect a more robust administrative staff; Not necessary with numbers, but with experience. Addressing the leadership should be the initial priority. A field grade adjutant should be placed in charge of the casualty branch to give it the aforementioned leadership and administrative knowledge required. The GS13 would make an excellent choice for assistant branch head and would still give continuity to the section. The operations chief is a billet more suitable for a master sergeant vice a staff sergeant. The change would add to the experience and maturity level of what the billet requires as well as appropriate level mentorship of the junior enlisted of

the branch and the staff noncommissioned officers (SNCOs) of subordinate units.

Next, the Funeral Honors section must be delineated on the branch's T/O. The section should be lead by a senior SNCO, preferably a gunnery sergeant with a drill instructor background. This would ensure some working knowledge of drill and ceremonies and supported by a staff sergeant and possibly two clerks. The benefit to remodeling the T/O in such a way would ensure routine sourcing from within the regular Marine Corps and not be dependent on the reserves. This doesn't prevent from augmenting the section with reserves during periods of increased operational tempo.

Lastly, the Marine Hospital Liaisons should be task organized under the Marine Corps Casualty Branch. This would ensure shared situational awareness and eliminate the duplicating of administrative efforts. The liaisons would be required to report to the casualty branch on a periodic basis the whereabouts and status of each Marine patient and would be another conduit for the casualty branch to take care of Marine families.

Conclusion

When a recruit enlists, a plebe enters the naval academy, or an officer candidate takes the oath of office to the join the Marine Corps, he or she does so with the understanding that a

promise is being made to him/her that the Marine Corps will take of him/her and his/her family in the event of their demise. With that promise is the inherent guarantee that the Corps will maintain an appropriate manpower structure to ensure adequate support is given. Although, credit should be given to the Marine Corps Casualty Branch for being the "Iron Man" of the Marine Corps and that it *can* do more with less; however, is this an area that such an example *should* be set? Restructuring the T/O would ensure much-needed leadership; routine sourcing and compliance with congressional mandates.⁷ Above all else the families would be better served and Marine Corps would always be able to say it kept its promise to the families.

Notes

1. "U. S. Military Casualties." Operation Enduring Freedom Casualties. October 30, 2005. <http://www.icasualties.org/oef/>
2. "Military Casualties." Iraq Coalition Casualty Count 2005. October 30, 2005. <http://icasualties.org/OIF//>
3. Baines, Walter. "Re: Marine Corps Casualty Statistics." Email message to author, October 15, 2005
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5. Jones, Kenneth., Captain, USMC. Operations Officer, Marine Corps Casualty Branch, Quantico, VA. Email message to author, December 14, 2005.
6. Marine Corps Casualty Branch Table of Organization
7. Rick Maze, "Congress Orders Better Casualty Assistance," Marine Corps Times, 30 January, 2006, 21.

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